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Galt MacDermot, Composer of the Rock Musical 'Hair,' Dies at 89

By Katharine Q. Seelye

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Galt MacDermot, who composed the score for “Hair,” the tribal rock musical that shocked mainstream theatergoers as it celebrated the drug-crazed, free-love, antiwar rebellious energy of hippies in the 1960s, died on Monday at his home in Staten Island. He was 89.

His daughter Molly MacDermot confirmed the death.

In 1968, when “Hair” opened on Broadway, Mr. MacDermot, a Canadian, cut an unlikely figure as its composer. His hair was short, he wore a shirt and tie, he didn’t smoke marijuana or drink alcohol, and he was approaching 40 — putting him on the far side of the generation gap.

John Lennon once invited him to a party, Ms. MacDermot said, but he didn’t go, preferring to head home to Staten Island, where he was raising his family.

“I never even heard of a hippie,” Mr. MacDermot told Playbill when he was asked to score “Hair,” whose book and lyrics had been written by James Rado and Gerome Ragni.

And yet, Mr. Rado said in a telephone interview, “He was coming up with this incredibly funky music with this original rhythm and blues sound.”

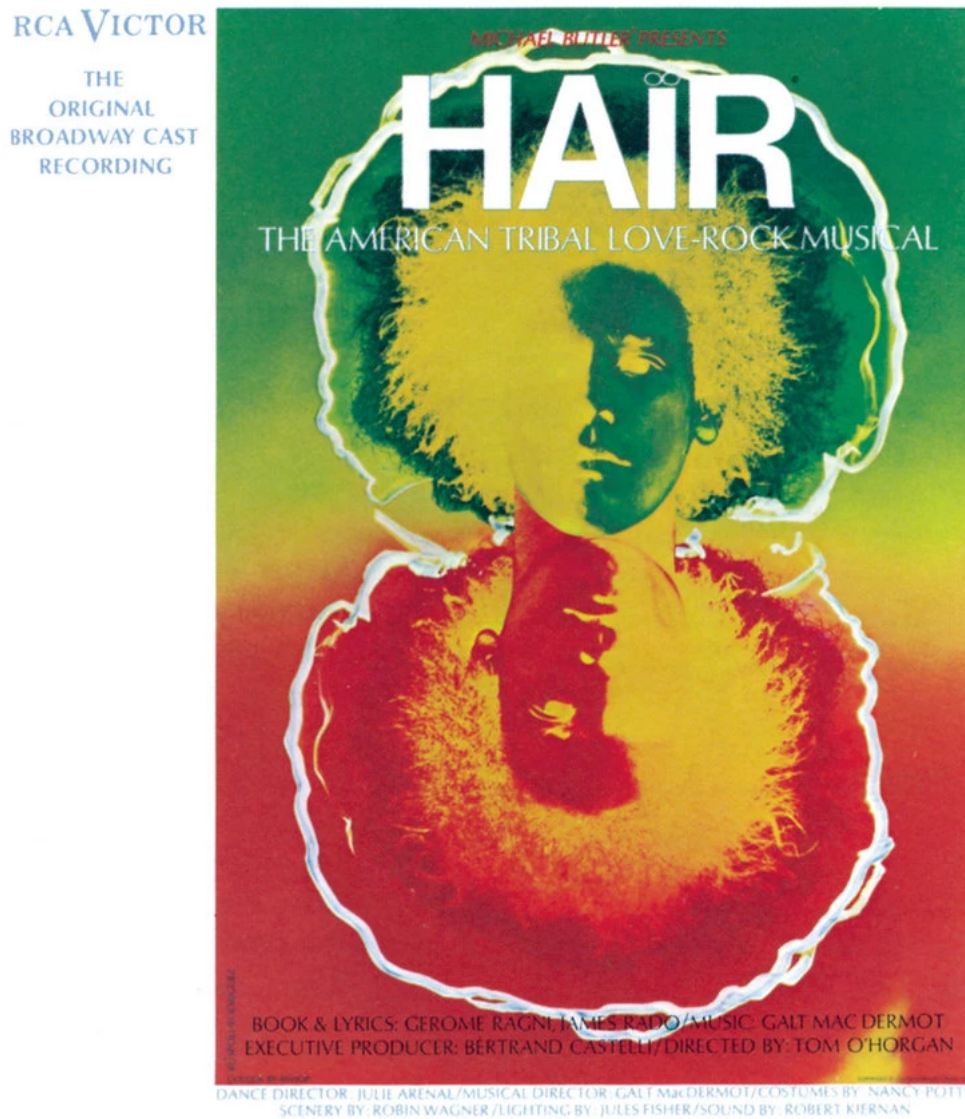
“Hair” became a cultural phenomenon and went on to win the Grammy for best score from an original cast show album.

“Utilizing every element of modern popular music,” the liner notes on the original Broadway cast recording said, “composer Galt MacDermot’s superb ‘Hair’ pieces reflect the sounds and rhythms emanating from New Orleans, Nashville, Liverpool, Memphis and New Delhi. The pulse is wired to today.”

Mr. MacDermot was a versatile composer and accomplished pianist who played everything from jazz to liturgical music. He had another Broadway hit with the music for “Two Gentlemen of Verona,” which won the Tony for best musical in 1972 (with lyrics by John Guare), beating out “Grease” and “Follies.”

His music, with its multiethnic influences, became a staple of hip-hop sampling. Numerous artists have repurposed his work, including Busta Rhymes, Run-D.M.C. and MF Doom, and several pay homage to him in a video called “Lookin4Galt.”

Mr. MacDermot also composed soundtracks for movies, including “Cotton Comes to Harlem” (1970), and worked with the noted drummer Bernard Purdie.



The original Broadway cast album of “Hair.”

“King Galt,” the musician Questlove wrote on Twitter on Monday. “The Broadway community is mourning his passing,” he said, “but best believe he was the hip-hop community’s too. It fed Nineties hip-hop something crazy!”

Mr. MacDermot was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2009, and, in 2010, he earned the lifetime achievement award from the Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada.

His best-known work remains “Hair,” with the songs “Aquarius / Let the Sunshine In” and “Easy to Be Hard” topping the pop music charts and becoming counterculture anthems.

“Hair” is set to make its live television debut this spring on NBC. Mr. Rado said that in response to past criticism that the show was sexist, he had been tinkering with the script to give the female characters more prominence.

Mr. Rado and Mr. Ragni, both actors, spent several years writing the script for “Hair,” which is set in Manhattan’s East Village against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, then had trouble finding a producer. Joseph Papp agreed to put it on as his inaugural production at the Public Theater. But the authors had to find a composer.

The script was sent initially to the pianist Herbie Hancock. But Mr. Hancock took too many liberties, Mr. Rado said, cutting several lyrics, so they looked for another composer.

Eventually a friend of a friend put them in touch with Mr. MacDermot, a pianist who had won two Grammys for the 1961 instrumental piece “African Waltz” (best original jazz composition and best instrumental theme or instrumental version of a song), recorded by Cannonball Adderly. Mr. MacDermot had just moved to New York, and within a couple of weeks he was receiving the lyrics for “Hair” and sending back a few songs.

“We loved what we heard,” Mr. Rado said. “The music fit like a glove. Galt set the words down exactly as they were on paper. We were very happy for someone not to be editing our stuff.”

The only song he had to rewrite was “Aquarius.” Mr. MacDermot himself said his first version was too “spacey.”

Mr. Ragni died in 1991.

Eric Grode, author of “Hair: The Story of the Show that Defined a Generation” (2010), said in a phone interview that one reason Mr. MacDermot’s score worked so well was its flexibility. The production was often “loosey goosey,” he said, with some actors not coming onstage on cue; Mr. MacDermot’s score allowed for their unpredictability.

“The music was designed to be elastic so you could play a riff an extra three or four times to give people backstage time to figure out what they were doing,” Mr. Grode said.

The Broadway cast of “Hair” at the Biltmore Theater in 1968. The show shocked many mainstream theatergoers as it celebrated the drug-crazed, free-love, antiwar rebellious energy of hippies in the 1960s. United Press International/Bettmann

The show opened at the Public in 1967, went through an extensive rewrite and moved to the now defunct Cheetah nightclub before transferring to the Biltmore Theater on Broadway in April 1968, directed by Tom O’Horgan. It opened in the West End of London that September and closed on Broadway in July 1972.

Four Broadway revivals have been staged since, most recently in 2011. And still, the audience storms the stage and dances with the cast during the curtain call, a tradition begun in 1968.

With its frontal nudity and liberal use of four-letter words, “Hair” shocked many audiences. It also upset some of the theater’s old guard, who felt threatened as rock was displacing show tunes on the Billboard charts.

And “Hair” definitely offered a new sound.

It was “the first Broadway musical in some time to have the authentic voice of today rather than the day before yesterday,” the critic Clive Barnes wrote in The New York Times. Mr. MacDermot’s music, Mr. Barnes added, had “strong soothing overtones of Broadway melody, but it precisely serves its purpose.”

The score was somewhat overshadowed by the explicit language in songs like “Hashish” and “Sodomy,” and by actions on stage, like the turning of the American flag upside down, a scene that prompted two astronauts in the audience to walk out.

“From the old guard’s perspective, Galt’s contribution to ‘Hair’ was probably the least objectionable part of the show,” Mr. Grode said.

“In a way, Galt was the grown-up in the room,” he said. “Without his rigor and craftsmanship, there would never have been a musical accomplished enough to make it to Broadway and get under everyone’s skin in the first place.”

Arthur Terence Galt MacDermot was born on Dec. 18, 1928, in Montreal. His father, Terence MacDermot, taught history at McGill University and later served as Canada’s ambassador to Greece, Israel, South Africa and Australia. His mother, Lella Elizabeth (Savage) MacDermot, was a homemaker.

They raised Galt and his two sisters mainly in Canada. He received his bachelor’s degree in history from Bishop’s University in Lennoxville, Quebec. He earned his master’s in music at the University of Cape Town, where he studied African music and where he met Marlene Bruynzeel; they married in 1956.

She survives him, along with a sister, Anne McDougall; a son, Vincent; and, in addition to his daughter Molly, three other daughters, Yolanda and Sarah MacDermot and Elizabeth MacDermot Murphy; seven grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

Mr. MacDermot had a disciplined schedule at home, his children said, getting up and going straight to the piano, either his baby grand Steinway or an upright Yamaha.

“When ideas weren’t coming to him, he would play classical music,” Vincent MacDermot said in a telephone interview. “That kept him limber. He wouldn’t sit in a chair and think about it. His dialogue was with the piano.”

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